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Economic Development in Ontario First Nations Communities



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Entrepreneurial spirit alive and growing in Ontario First Nations

It's often said that small businesses are one of the central forces driving the Canadian economy. The same holds true for Ontario's First Nations business community.

All across Ontario, in the resource industry, technology, transportation and construction trades, First Nations small businesses are a leading force in providing employment, developing skills and human capacity, and supporting Aboriginal economies.

That's not to say that Aboriginal people and businesses are not represented within the larger corporate sectors. In fact, First Nations enterprises are represented in all of the major economic industries that are found in Ontario, and Aboriginal people are excelling in the legal and academic professions, health care, social services, the public service and in politics.

In response to the report on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and the Speech from the Throne, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) has helped launch many Aboriginal business ventures and supported the goal of achieving strong communities, people and economies.



Promoting an Aboriginal business sector

The private sector is increasingly active in working with First Nations to make the most of the business potential that exists in Aboriginal communities. Banks are supporting a growing number of individual Aboriginal entrepreneurs and ventures, both on- and off-reserve.

Many businesses and communities are successfully managing major capital projects. And the Aboriginal financial sector in Ontario is growing rapidly.

However, there is a unanimous understanding that more must be done. The key is creating meaningful, long-term partnerships and a willingness for people to find a common understanding when dealing with people from various cultures.

Partnership is the key to success

"When we look at our history, there are countless examples of how we worked in friendship and cooperation," says Ken Ross, Chief Executive Officer for the Aboriginal Economic Renewal Initiative. "Now we're saying we have to get back to that, because our future is in economic development.

"Fundamentally, it's good for people from different cultures to work together. It's good for business and the bottom line. It promotes cooperation and prevents misunderstanding.

"We all know that there are some real barriers that exist, but if we use business as a vehicle to cut through the misunderstanding and promote mutual self-interest, then everyone will benefit – especially through the bottom line."

Ross says many First Nations business leaders believe that communities need to develop new organizational structures to promote independence.

A lot of work has been done over the past few years to create an Aboriginal business alliance in Ontario that would work in much the same way as a Chamber of Commerce. This, in turn, would create a forum for First Nations businesses to create partnerships and promote the value of doing business with Aboriginal groups.

The road ahead – building blocks for an economy

Economic development is at the heart of the federal government's commitment to building strong First Nations communities and economies. Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Robert D. Nault, is emphatic when talking about the issue.

"We are partners with First Nations. We will work towards a better future and we'll do it by taking a practical, balanced and integrated approach."

The trend towards self-determination is evident across the country. In the past

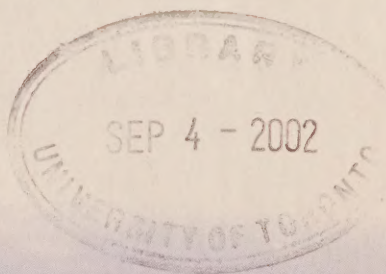
10 years, the number of new Aboriginal businesses has exceeded those of the rest of the Canadian population by 105 percent. There are now 20,000 Aboriginal-owned businesses in Canada, spanning all sectors of the economy. These businesses create jobs for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and help strengthen local economies.

\$16 million in funding

In Ontario, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development provided close to \$16 million in small business funding during the 2001-2002 fiscal year. In the north, access to natural resources has spurred more First Nations involvement in the forestry, mining and fishing sectors.

Hydro production ventures are being developed in the north, an outgrowth of recent changes in Ontario's hydroelectricity industry.

First Nations are pursuing business opportunities in tourism, agriculture and trade, manufacturing and transportation, information technology, financial and human services, insurance and banking. All of this spells job creation – and improved quality of life.



Fort William First Nation: Bowater sawmill



Minister Robert D. Nault joined Chief Peter Collins (seated, right) and Roger Barber, Bowater Vice President of Woodlands Operations, to announce their new sawmill partnership at a community celebration held November 16, 2001.

If you ever venture near the south end of the city of Thunder Bay, chances are you may notice a distinct scent in the air, billowing from the stack of the Bowater Pulp and Paper Plant. Some refer to it as the sweet smell of success.

For the nearby community of Fort William First Nation, it's a welcoming aroma after recently signing a multi-million-dollar deal with the company. The new Bowater sawmill, set to open next year, represents a milestone in the relationship between the forest industry and First Nations.

Since plans were announced in November 2001 for the construction of a new \$14-million industrial park on Fort William First Nation lands, the project has moved ahead rapidly. The sawmill will be built and leased by the First Nation to Bowater. Work began on schedule at the end of 2001 as the site was cleared and readied for construction.

"All site development was negotiated by Fort William First Nation," said Marvin Pelletier, project manager. "This has created jobs and gives us experience. The actual construction started at the beginning of March."

"Once completed, equipment and associated infrastructure will be installed later this summer," said Roger Barber, Vice-President Ontario and Nova Scotia Woodlands for Bowater. "The facility will have a partial start-up late this year and, it's anticipated, will become fully operational in the spring of 2003."

The creation of jobs will be one of the tangible benefits of the project. The government estimates it will generate \$100 million in benefits to First Nations over the next 20 years.

In addition to the construction work, there will be jobs in the sawmill and in related areas such as transportation,

on-reserve fuel sales and restaurants. The First Nation will be leasing land and facilities to Bowater. The company, in turn, will invest \$50 million in equipment to operate the sawmill.

"We are leasing the land and building a fully developed site," said Pelletier. "This makes it less expensive for the company. By doing that, we reduce the capital investment the company has to make. We gave Bowater a 20-year lease so that they know they have long-term security."

Pelletier commends Bowater for its confidence in the project and its cooperation with the First Nation. "I give full credit to Bowater for blazing the trail," he said. "They have set an example that large projects can be done and investment can be secured on First Nation land."

When operational, the sawmill will bring economic benefits to the city of Thunder Bay as well. "The city of Thunder Bay took a very proactive view of this," said Pelletier. "They realized that if this project was not built on First Nation land, it may not be built at all and the city would not reap the benefits. By helping the First Nation build a strong economy, it will support the economy of the city as well."

This project is expected to attract other businesses to the new industrial park and to further enhance the economic climate in the region. "I see this as a template for future development," said Pelletier.

Indeed, the phones have been "ringing off the hook" at the First Nation as the forest and resources industries are now taking a good, hard look at what First Nations can offer.

All-weather road will open Slate Falls First Nation economy

For the almost 200 people living in the remote First Nation of Slate Falls, just getting in and out of this northwestern Ontario community is a challenge. The First Nation has no all-weather access road to link it to the regional and provincial roadways or to the closest town – Sioux Lookout, 140 km to the south.

Slate Falls has only two means of transportation: chartered flights, which are very expensive, and the winter road, which is always snow-packed and often icy. To complicate matters, winter conditions in recent years have been unfavourable for winter road construction and maintenance. As a result, access in and out of Slate Falls has been that much more limited and costly.

These obstacles to transporting people, goods and services touch profoundly on many aspects of life in Slate Falls. The lack of an all-weather road prevents the community from taking advantage of work in the local forestry, mining and tourism industries.

Because a large percentage of the population is under the age of 25, this restriction on economic opportunity and meaningful employment is a frustrating and serious waste of potential.

Then there are the inescapable high costs of flying in hundreds of tonnes of

goods annually – from bulk fuels to building materials and foodstuffs. Add to this the fact that there is only one operator-assisted telephone for the entire community, and Slate Falls' need for an all-season road becomes strikingly obvious.

Because the estimated cost of road construction is \$7 million, the First Nation started looking at the possibilities of a joint-venture project. They found a potential partner in

McKenzie Forest Products Inc., which holds timber harvesting rights south of Slate Falls. The company plans to harvest this timber over the next few years, but must first build a suitable access road. McKenzie representatives said they were willing to work with the First Nation to raise this road's standard to a level suitable for all-weather community access.

With the assistance of its tribal council – the Windigo First Nations Council – and \$80,000 in funding from the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), Slate Falls began negotiations with McKenzie Forest Products on the access road and their own participation in the area's forest industry.

Providing the First Nation with logistical support and advice is DIAND's

Northern Infrastructure Implementation Group, a new unit with employees in Sioux Lookout and Thunder Bay. "From concept to construction, we're working with First Nations on all-weather roads," explains the group's manager, Harold Demetzer. "Create roads and economic opportunities will be moving with you, or just shortly behind."

Other partners in the Slate Falls road project are expected to include the Ontario ministries of Northern Development and Mines, and Natural Resources. Slate Falls estimates that the construction project will create 45 jobs for one year.

"It opens economic opportunities in forestry," says Chief Lawrence Masakeyash about the project, "and it increases the possibilities of getting a phone system once the road is in the community."

First Nation Councillor Sarah Mitchell says the lower cost of transporting construction and other materials "will mean we can stretch DIAND dollars and do more in the community with them."

The road will also help Slate Falls deal more efficiently and effectively with medical emergencies, adds Councillor Arlene Wabason. And as community member Van Cook points out, visits to family and friends in other communities will be far more affordable when people are able to drive their own vehicles. From dynamic economic opportunities to sports tournaments with other invited communities, the all-weather access road will open a new world to the people of Slate Falls.



Smooth flying for Wasaya Airways

For the Ojibway, Oji-Cree and Cree communities in northwestern Ontario and northeastern Manitoba, Wasaya Airways Limited Partnership is a lifeline. You name it, the company hauls it: from food, clothing and heating fuel, to boats, snowmobiles and building materials, to medical, hardware and office supplies. It also transports passengers to medical, social and educational services, business meetings and visits to family and friends.

Headquartered in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Wasaya provides transport services to over 30 communities. Wasaya flies where other airlines do not – to remote communities, many without road access. Lacking the benefit of money from land claims or royalties, Wasaya built the company through solid business planning and community support.

Today, 12 years after its founding, the Aboriginal-owned and operated company earns more than \$30 million a year, employs 155 people and annually carries over 30 million kilograms of cargo and more than 5,000 passengers.

This thriving business owes its origins to a Kingfisher Lake Elder who had a vision of planes coming into the communities and the communities working together to develop economic opportunities. In fact, Wasaya's logo – an eight-pointed sun – symbolizes the eight First Nations who, together in 1989, followed the Elder's vision and bought a 49 percent share in a small air transport business.

These eight First Nations shareholder communities include Bearskin Lake, Kasabonika Lake, Kingfisher Lake, Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug, Wapekeka, Wawakapewin, Webequie and Wunnumin Lake. Wasaya, which

means "rising sun," symbolizes the beginning of a new day for these northern communities. Wasaya president Tom Morris says the vision was like "the light breaking over the horizon for the communities we now serve."

The company holds fast to its Aboriginal roots. Elders from the communities serve as advisors, lending their wisdom to planning sessions. As well, the company's guiding principles reflect the communities' customs and traditions.

In 2001, Wasaya received economic development funding from the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development to help expand its charter service to include float planes and skiplanes that can land on water and snow in remote areas. This arm of the business, called Wasaya Ma Mow Ltd. (which translates to "united in the sky"), is servicing the region's tourism industry as well as isolated camps and communities where airstrips cannot be built.

Tom Morris, understandably proud of the steady growth and success of the company, notes that "we are striving to become a major player in the transport and fuel industry in the region, as well as a major economic force. In fact, I believe we're almost there."

Certainly others see the company as a solid transport provider. Wasaya recently won contracts from Hydro One

to haul fuel and employees to its wilderness sites. The airline also has major contracts with Canada Post, Placer Dome and The North West Company.

However, Wasaya is not just about business. It gives back to the communities through its non-profit branch, Wasaya Weecheewaywin Inc. This branch offers programs that enhance the quality of life for Wasaya First Nations members – from education and training to poverty reduction and maintenance of Aboriginal identity.

As part of this community outreach, for example, every Christmas Wasaya Airways provides and delivers a free turkey to every family in the eight communities.

The future looks bright as Wasaya continues to enjoy solid

community support. Its parent company, Wasaya Corporation, is busily diversifying into business arms that focus on delivering petroleum and petroleum products, airplane maintenance and, in the future, finding a niche in the trucking industry.

No matter where Wasaya expands, Tom Morris observes, "we will stand by our community-based objective of providing safe, reliable, cost-effective transportation services."



Wasaya Airways passengers, bound for points further south, board this flight in Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug.

Determination – a community asset and a way of making life better

Garden River and Anishinabek celebrate "firsts"

Garden River First Nation, near Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., has been expanding economic opportunities for its members and supporting greater self-sufficiency and enhancing their quality of life as a result.

Their persistence and hard work has paid off. The First Nation successfully negotiated with the Province of Ontario, over the past 25 years, to rebuild the four-lane, 16-km portion of Highway 17 running through its territory.

The road will now be diverted away from the village, and will be connected with the Trans-Canada Highway. Since 1999, the First Nation has benefited from 40 full-time, construction-related jobs that have resulted in training opportunities and transferable job skills.

Aboriginal owned

Chief Lyle Sayers notes further benefits: "The old highway is dangerous. Once the road is diverted, large transport trucks – especially ones carrying dangerous loads such as chemicals – will no longer pose a threat to the village."

The Garden River Development Corporation – 100 percent owned by the First Nation – has partnered with Peter Kiewit & Sons Co. Ltd., a 50 percent Aboriginal-owned private firm, for the

project. Construction is estimated to take nine years. Chief Sayers looks forward to the First Nation establishing its own construction company and bidding on other projects beyond its territory.

Garden River First Nation also rallied around the Anishinabek Nation Credit Union, headquartered in the village. As the first Aboriginal credit union

Anishinabek Nation Credit Union

Kenton Eggleston, Anishinabek Nation Credit Union General Manager, says "an Aboriginal-owned and operated financial institution gives First Nations people access to quality financial services, such as housing loans, a willingness to deal with seasonal incomes and the respect

and understanding that are sometimes lacking during interactions with non-Aboriginal financial institutions."

After seven years of raising development capital, securing a charter from the Province (a challenge in itself) and raising risk capital, the credit union opened its doors in November 2001.

The Anishinabek Nation Credit Union now serves – by mail, telephone and electronic banking – all First Nations Status people who live or work within 300 km of Garden River First Nation, or whose community is a member of the Union of Ontario Indians.

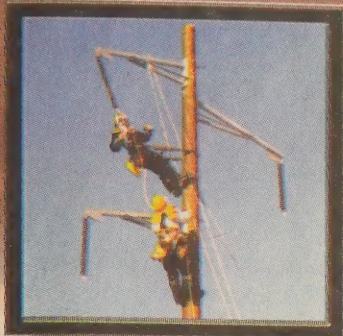
The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, recognizing the community's active determination to provide employment and future business opportunities for its members, made contributions to each project in the fall 2001.



Celebrating the Grand Opening of the Anishinabek Nation Credit Union on November 15, 2001 were (left to right): Daryl Desmoulin, Board Member; Allan Moffatt, Business Development Officer, ANCU; Linda Chiblow, Chair, Board of Directors; Lyle Sayers, Chief, Garden River First Nation; Joe Hare, former Grand Council Chief; Vernon Roote, Grand Council Chief; Kenton Eggleston, General Manager, ANCU; Lewis Debassige, Vice Chair, Board of Directors; James Maness, Board Member; and Felix Stonypointe, Board Member.

established in Ontario, it is a testimony to strong community perseverance in the face of many challenges.

The Union of Ontario Indians, wishing to create its own financial institution, chose a credit union as the best fit due to its lower start-up costs – and because its democratic control and membership structure is very close to the governing practices of First Nations.



Mega-project powers way for other large First Nations projects

Five Nation Energy building its own 'roads to success' with new project

A mega-project that will save millions of tax dollars in the coming years and reduce the risk of environmental damage, is also creating jobs. It's a process that other large-scale First Nations projects will be able to use as a blueprint.

Five Nation Energy's Omuškego Ishkodayo project will supply the Attawapiskat, Fort Albany and Kashechewan First Nations with a reliable source of electricity and will phase out the communities' current diesel-burning generating stations.

The First Nations-owned Five Nations Energy Inc. contracted SNC-Lavalin to assist them in the construction of the \$58.1-million project to connect 4,500 inhabitants of the three remote First Nations to Ontario's main power grid.

Benefits for local people include improved health and safety conditions, a reliable source of electricity, a more eco-friendly power source and improved economic opportunities.

Ending the diesel use has several advantages. To start with, diesel produces greenhouse gases. As well, the fuel had to be transported into the communities on barges or on winding

winter roads through hundreds of kilometres of fragile terrain. Without the diesel, the threat of fuel spills is gone and the communities will no longer have to maintain super-tank storage farms.

The project's scope and size make it a model for other major First Nations projects in Ontario. To attract a consortium of financial institutions and lending agencies to finance the project, the communities formed a united front. "What we are doing is putting all the checks and balances in place to create a reporting system that gives comfort to the governments, to our partners, to our lenders, but most specifically to our community members. Remembering that it is the three northern communities who will own this, we're not just developing a project, we are also developing a process that other projects can follow," says Ed Chilton, Five Nations Energy Project Coordinator.

"The diesel generators would have to be upgraded to suit community needs, but by replacing them we're going to save the governments \$150- to \$200 million over the next 30 years," says Chilton.

"As a result of this project, we have already been able to provide electricity to a new, \$18-million education complex and to 51 new housing units." Another community will soon launch a major housing development. "It's allowing for unhindered growth in the communities."

The transmission project will help create a better climate for new business development as existing businesses will see overhead drop. For example, refrigeration costs stand to decline as businesses will no longer rely on expensive propane-burning units.

The power hook-up is just the start. Mushkegowuk Council, which represents the communities, is currently carrying out a feasibility study on its telecommunications network infrastructure and how the system can be improved. "This would provide for better support and growth for tele-medicine, long distance education and e-commerce. It will bring the world to the northern remote communities," says Chilton.

Work on the recently completed 270-km power transmission line provided employment for as many as 100 First Nations members during the peak construction period, and six community residents are now apprentice linemen. While employment was a significant benefit of the project, there have been others including the creation of Five Nations Energy itself.

The non-profit company is operated by the Attawapiskat, Fort Albany and Kashechewan First Nations in partnership with the Moose Cree and New Post First Nations – who also have a vested interest in the project. Power is generated at Otter Rapids on traditional New Post territory, while the transmission lines cut through Moose Cree territory.



Wabigoon First Nation enterprise a growing success

Anishnaabe Gitigewin Tree Nursery Inc. truly state-of-the-art

A community that once cut trees for the forestry industry now operates one of northern Ontario's most modern tree nurseries.

Located at Wabigoon First Nation, 30 km east of Dryden, Anishnaabe Gitigewin Tree Nursery Inc. employs eight full-time staff and 30 to 40 additional employees during the growing season. Last year, more than six million jack pine and black spruce seedlings were grown at the 94,000 square-foot facility.

The nursery features state-of-the-art technology. Computers give readings on the temperature, humidity and sunlight levels essential to the seedlings' germination and growing stages. Heaters, watering machines, exhaust fans and windows respond automatically to changes in the environment.

Everything from seeding to winter storage takes place right on the

premises. This allows nursery staff to oversee all aspects of quality control and provide their customers with the best possible service from start to finish. It's a constant battle to create the right growing conditions and to prevent damage from pests or disease.

Nursery manager Roddy Brown jokes that he's been more interested in the

attention to detail is paying off, since the nursery's first two crops have exceeded expectations in both quality and quantity – and extra seedlings mean extra revenue.

Owned and operated by Wabigoon First Nation, Anishnaabe Gitigewin Tree Nursery Inc. is an outstanding example of how successful partnerships can bring employment, business opportunities, and economic growth to Aboriginal communities.

In addition to negotiating bank loans, the First Nation received funding assistance from Human Resources Development Canada, FedNor and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. This partnership reflects the Government of Canada's commitment in the 2001 Speech from the Throne to support a wide range of initiatives to accelerate First Nations participation in the economy.

The nursery's prime customers are Weyerhaeuser Company Ltd. and Bowater Forest Products Division, who purchased 3.5 million and 2.1 million seedlings respectively this year. These companies also provided essential technical, legal and business advice



Nursery worker Fred Garneau checks black spruce seedlings that have just come through a Jiffy root cutter.

weather in the last few years than he ever thought possible. He even cuts off friends and family in mid-sentence when the weather report comes on. But this

during the nursery's development stages. And there's room to grow in another sense. Brown says the key is to maintain the quality of the current output while the company considers whether to expand its crops to appeal to the largest possible market.

"We want to diversify, but we have to ensure we do it well if we're going to succeed," he explains. "We're under a magnifying glass, so we want to stay top-notch. We do have the facility to diversify so nothing will hold us back when we're ready. We have the people who are dedicated to making this a success but we need the knowledge too, and that's coming with each year."

Spin-off businesses

Wabigoon Chief Tom Favell says that the tree nursery's success has the First Nation exploring other spin-off businesses such as cone and tree planting contracts, technical advisory services to other tree nurseries, the growing of surplus seedlings for resale, and a sawmill that could focus on specialty hardwood products. The community is also thinking of growing vegetables during the winter while the seedlings are in storage.

And there's another valuable spin-off – the nursery is bringing a sense of

confidence to the community. "It has instilled pride and a sense of accomplishment. We are identified by other nurseries as having a state-of-the-art facility and finishing two very successful growing years. And that recognition is important," Favell notes.

Wabigoon's ultimate goal is to give off-reserve members a chance to live

and work at home. "Our objective is to create so many jobs here that we won't be able to fill them all and we'll have to recruit from other First Nations and the non-Native community."

If Anishnaabe Gitigewin's success to date is any indication, it's a goal that's well within reach.

For more information about Anishnaabe Gitigewin Tree Nursery Inc., contact Roddy Brown at (807) 938-1302 or Chief Tom Favell at (807) 938-6684.



This black spruce seedling (left) started from a Jiffy pellet, like the one shown here.

Roddy Brown (below) checks one of the nursery's four "water walkers" as it passes over jack pine seedlings.



Sixdion Group Inc. – looking beyond the borders for partnering opportunities

Sixdion Group Inc. leading the way in the electronic age

Based at the Eagle's Nest Complex on Six Nations-owned land in Brantford, Ont., with an office in Ottawa, a dynamic company has made a profitable business out of delivering information management, strategic consulting and telecommunications services to its clients.

Sixdion Group Inc. takes its name from the Mohawk words *six* ("the crossing over") and *dion* ("sustenance for life"). Company founders say the name reflects the need to adapt and evolve in today's ever-changing economy. They're definitely living up to their name.

"We're taking communities from being an *Indian Act* band to becoming a First Nation that is functioning in the information age," says Lewis Staats, Sixdion Managing Partner and Director of Strategic Consulting. For example, Sixdion has a \$1.4-million contract to develop an electronic document management solution for Mnjikaning Rama First Nation. Community leaders there are making a serious move towards accomplishing band transparency and accountability. Sixdion's solution will

mean band information is available to all community members.

Sixdion, an ISO 9002-certified company, was established in 1996 and was initially located on the main part of the Six Nations reserve. With funding assistance from the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Sixdion relocated to the Eagle's Nest Complex

in 2001 to access better technology infrastructure – another example of the Government of Canada fulfilling its commitment to work in partnership on a wide range of initiatives to accelerate First Nations and Inuit participation in the economy.

All of Canada benefits

"Small Aboriginal businesses that are community-based are going to make First Nations prosper," says Staats. "Obviously we're not working in isolation – so as we prosper and grow, the surrounding communities and the rest of Canada prospers and grows too."

Sixdion has always looked beyond the borders of Six Nations for its partnering opportunities. The vast majority of its customers do not have any Aboriginal connections – only 10 percent of its government contracts fall under the Procurement Strategy for Aboriginal Business, a program designed to increase the amount of goods and services purchased by the federal government from Aboriginal businesses.

Whether they are forming alliances with companies like Bombardier or national organizations like the Assembly of First Nations, Sixdion delivers world-class solutions.



Dan Shilling (left), Nation Manager, Mnjikaning First Nation; Lewis Staats (centre), Managing Partner, Sixdion Inc.; and Rick Morano, Chief Financial Officer, Mnjikaning First Nation, finish signing the \$1.4-million contract between Mnjikaning and Sixdion to implement an Electronic Document Management Solution (EDMS) for their community's administration.

Cree Village EcoLodge

MoCreebec Council – Cree Village EcoLodge

Until recently, living hundreds of miles north of the last road meant isolation and economic struggle for the Cree people of Moose Factory, an island community on the Moose River near James Bay.

But times have changed. The Cree are aggressively entering the growing eco-tourism market with their new, world-class "ecolodge." It's a facility derived from the heart and soul of the Cree people. Surrounded by the Canadian sub-Arctic in a community steeped in Aboriginal culture, the Cree Village EcoLodge offers visitors a rare experience.

Today, the lodge employs 29 people, all but one of whom are Aboriginal. While the MoCreebec Council of the Cree Nation contributed its own equity and managed the development of the \$7-million lodge, a number of other groups contributed financially as well, including the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation, Aboriginal Business Canada, the Wakenagun Community Financial Development Corporation and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. The department's contribution is an example of how the Government of Canada is working in partnership with First Nations, other governments and the private sector to improve access to economic development opportunities.

"The people around here are very proud of their accomplishments," said Randy Kapashesit, Chief of the MoCreebec Council of the Cree Nation and the Chief Executive Officer for the

Cree EcoLodge. "To see people's ideas come together in a way that leads to success has been a positive experience for the Cree people."

Given their longstanding history and culture, the Cree people of Moose Factory are ideally suited to act as hosts of the natural world for their visitors. Activities include bird watching, summer and winter camping, whale sighting, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, star gazing, nature tours, river tours, kayaking, canoeing and cultural tours.

The EcoLodge's design and appointments reflect traditional Cree values. Chairs, couches, tables – even the birch window blinds – are made of natural woods. Carpeting and blankets throughout are 100 percent organic wool. Wall treatments, mattresses, pillows, and linens are 100 percent organic cotton. Organic vegetable-based hand-soaps, shampoos and conditioners are found in every room. Four of the rooms feature composting toilets which use no water, produce no odours and

require no chemical treatments. Even the paint, sparingly used, is a special low-gas emission formula. Guests with allergies and chemical sensitivities will love this place.



Randy Kapashesit, CEO, Cree EcoLodge.

The soaring Shabotowan Great Hall, designed after a traditional Cree dwelling, provides dining for 66, and serves seasonally available Aboriginal food such as wild rice, berries and maple syrup.

For twenty-first century professionals looking for the inspiration of a very special setting, the EcoLodge provides meeting facilities for business retreats. Audio-visual equipment and in-room modem connections are all available.



Waterfront view of the Cree EcoLodge.

Tidewater Provincial Park is less than a mile away. The saltwater of James Bay, where seals and beluga whales are common, is a short boat ride from the lodge. Adjacent river systems abound with fish and wildlife including moose, otter, beaver and caribou, pike and trout, geese, eagles, and many other birds. In fact, bird watchers will love the internationally recognized Shipsand Island Bird Sanctuary, located close by and definitely worth a trip.

Canoes and kayaks make for quiet travel in the summer. Skis and snowshoes provide locomotion in the winter. For deep-bush adventures, the EcoLodge can customize trips that include Cree guides, motorized freighter canoes, snow machines, helicopters or float planes.

A year-round path circles most of the island. Bicycles are an easy way to tour Moose Factory. Historic buildings, artifacts and a museum of the fur trade, established here in 1673 by Hudson Bay

Company, are a short walk from the EcoLodge.

Getting to EcoLodge can still be an adventure. There are no roads. You either fly-in or ride the train from Cochrane to Moosonee, then travel a couple more miles by boat or helicopter, or over the ice, depending on the season.

For more information, please contact the Cree Village EcoLodge toll free at 1-888-Creeway.



Dining room at the Cree Village EcoLodge restaurant.

Award-winning business woman brings home the store

Mishkeegogamang First Nation

Imagine driving 35 km out of town every time you need to gas up your car, pick up basic supplies like milk, bread, and diapers or buy stamps and mail a letter. Now, imagine that you don't have a car and the taxi ride to pick up some daily necessities costs up to \$140.

That was the situation for residents in Mishkeegogamang First Nation from the time their band-operated store closed in 1995 until Laureen's Gas & Grocery opened in December 1998. Home to about 960 on-reserve residents, Mishkeegogamang is located about 260 km north of the TransCanada Highway and about 35 km from its nearest neighbouring community, Pickle Lake.

Thanks to store owner and manager Laureen Wassaykeesic, residents can now shop locally for a wide variety of basics, including fresh produce, dry and canned goods, frozen meats and even hardware supplies. They also now have a local gas bar and access to full postal services.

The idea for this business venture came at an unlikely time. Laureen was a third-year nursing student at Thunder Bay's Lakehead University when her cousin and "behind the scenes partner" Stan Shingebis approached her about starting a business in their home community. Stan needs ongoing medical treatment that requires him to live in the city. He was looking for an investment that would help provide an income for his future and first suggested that Laureen start a Mishkeegogamang-based taxi business.

"At that time, I didn't think it would be a good business because of the competition from three other cab companies in Pickle Lake," Laureen recalls. "I thought a store would be better."

She adds with a laugh that Stan's hoped-for cab company became a reality last year when she expanded the grocery and gas business to start Ojibway Taxi. The company's two full-time drivers provide service within Mishkeegogamang and to other northern destinations. With a round-trip fare to Pickle Lake priced at \$90, Ojibway Taxi offers customers a competitive alternative.

Laureen's belief that Mishkeegogamang needed a local store was shared by Chief and council, says Economic Development Officer Tom Wassaykeesic. They encouraged her to expand her original plan for a highway gas and convenience store. Many community members don't have cars and found it difficult and expensive to shop outside the community. A local store with full gas and grocery service would offer residents a very welcome, cost-saving alternative.

Backed by Chief and council's support, Laureen and Stan provided

their own equity and Laureen sought additional financial support. Loans and contributions from Nishnawbe-Aski Development Fund (NADF), the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Placer

Dome's Musselwhite Mine helped the business on its way. The First Nation also contributed, providing the store lot, a loan to purchase the operation's four trailers and other support.

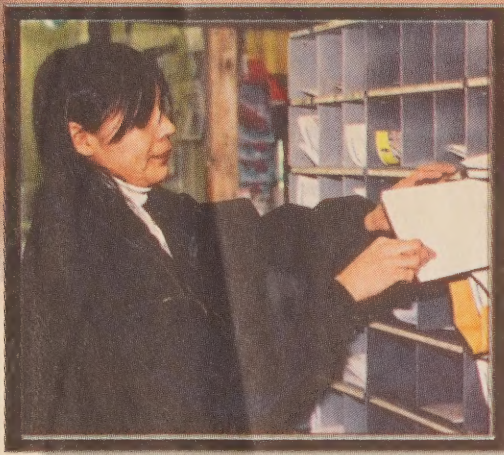
"She was able to make use of the band's heavy equipment while they were clearing the store site, and they provided backfill and other

assistance," explains Tom. "They wanted to support her and found some ways to help minimize some of her costs."

The Chief and council also set a five-year moratorium on the development of any other stores or gas stations in that portion of the community. While Tom stresses that this isn't meant to discourage other potential entrepreneurs, he says it was a way to help give Laureen the best possible chance for success during the start-up phase. As to what else has gone into making this enterprise a success, Tom gives the credit to Laureen and her willingness to do what it takes to make the business thrive.



Laureen Wassaykeesic was named Nishnawbe-Aski Nation Businesswoman of the Year twice in recognition of the important contribution her store and taxi service have made to her community.



Postal clerk Deanna Wassaykeesic distributes the day's mail. The store offers full postal services through its Canada Post franchise.

sometimes drop off fish or wild game to show their appreciation.

Laureen credits much of her success to her dedicated, hardworking staff. Their willingness "to go the extra mile" allows her to focus on running the business without having

to get involved in every detail of the day-to-day operations.

And if the store's financial statements are any indication, this balance seems to be working out just right. First year gross sales totalled \$1.2 million and that number has steadily increased, reaching \$2.7 million by her third year in business.

As for future plans, Laureen hasn't ruled out an expansion that would allow her to bring in more goods and compete more closely with other area retailers. She would also like to expand the taxi service into a more complete operation, with two-way radios and a separate taxi stand to allow her to provide the best possible service.

"I'm not the kind of person to sit back and watch other people do things," she says, explaining the inner drive that got her working on the store in the first place. "I'm outgoing and have always been very involved in the community. If I see something that needs to be done, I don't like to wait for someone else to

do it. I'll take a chance and see how I can get involved to make it happen."

Both Chief Roundhead and Tom say they hope the success of Laureen's Gas & Grocery will encourage others to take advantage of the many economic development opportunities they see open to their community.

"That's the whole idea behind our support for this business," says Chief Roundhead. "We want to see the rest of

Chief Ronald Roundhead agrees. "There is a lot of hard work that goes into this kind of business in terms of the planning, the applications for funding and everything else," he says. "But Laureen took it in stride. It's a difficult thing for anyone to put what they believe in on paper, but she did it and made it work."

Others are taking notice of Laureen's efforts, too. NADF named her Businesswoman of the Year in both 2000 and 2001. Winning once surprised Laureen. Winning twice left her shocked and deeply appreciative of the recognition that the store has made a real contribution to her First Nation.

Tom notes this contribution goes beyond just providing shopping options – it has provided five full-time jobs in addition to Laureen's. It's also a source of pride for community members. "It makes people feel good having the store in their community," he says.

Public accolades aside, Laureen says one of the most satisfying things about taking on this business has been the many friendships that have developed. People often stop by to chat even when they aren't shopping. Elders, pleased to receive service in the Ojibway language,



Laureen's offers residents like Mervin Masakeyash a chance to shop close to home for a wide range of grocery and hardware items.

the membership setting up businesses and taking advantage of the opportunities that are out there."

For more information about Laureen's Gas & Grocery, contact Laureen Wassaykeesic at (807) 928-2132 or Tom Wassaykeesic at (807) 928-2980.

Ontario First Nations Demographics

Statistics

Registered Indian population	155,234
On-reserve and Crown Lands.....	76,239
Off-reserve	78,905
Number of reserves and settlements ..	204 (65% inhabited)
Number of recognized First Nations...	126
Estimated Aboriginal population in Toronto.....	60,000-80,000

First Nation Language Groupings in Ontario

Algonkian Languages

- Algonquin
- Cree
- Delaware
- Nishnaabemwin
- Ojibway
- Ojicree
- Potawatomi

Iroquoian Languages

- Mohawk
- Cayuga
- Seneca
- Tuscarora
- Oneida
- Onondaga

Did you know?

- The Aboriginal workforce will grow at twice the rate of the total Canadian labour force in the next ten years.
- 50% of the population in Aboriginal communities is under the age of 25 – and that percentage continues to rise every year.
- More than 27,000 First Nations and Inuit students are currently enrolled in colleges and universities.
- There are now 20,000 Aboriginal-owned businesses in Canada. In Ontario, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development provided close to \$18 million in small business funding during the 2001-2002 fiscal year.
- First Nations enterprises are represented in all of the major economic industries found in Ontario – and Aboriginal people are excelling in the legal and academic professions, health care, social services, the public service and in politics.
- In 2000-2001, in Ontario, DIAND's Economic Development Opportunity Fund and Resource Acquisition Initiative supported: 52 business start-ups or expansion projects, creating 159 full-time and 78 part-time jobs.
- DIAND's Opportunity Fund supports the economic and capacity development of First Nations communities in the pursuit of new business opportunities. The fund helps attract joint venture partners that will expand existing businesses, create sustainable jobs, enhance community wealth, and reduce social dependency.
- The Resource Acquisition Initiative (RAI) is a national program that assists First Nations and Inuit resource-based businesses. One of the main objectives of the RAI program is to lend financial support to companies that will create employment and reduce social dependency.
- DIAND also spent approximately \$12 million to support other community economic development initiatives.
- DIAND Funding: \$15,686,065.
- Each DIAND dollar leverages \$9.60 in First Nation equity and other sources.
- Equity (proponent and First Nation funding): \$8,565,417.
- Commercial Financing: \$17,276,689.
- Other sources (provincial government, other federal departments, and private sector partnerships): \$125,266,000.



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